

Re-Locating Violence and Trauma in “The Journey”

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Abstract: Literature provides a legitimate and appropriate means of analyzing conflict and trauma. The literature from the Northeastern region of India addresses some of the region's contemporary psychological and social issues. The socio-political landscape of the Northeast has seen enormous shifts in the last few decades. Traumatic events throughout its past have influenced the literature of the various regions. Violence motivated explicitly by hatred and strife between ethnic groups is referred to as ethnic violence. Political violence is frequently linked to it. The paper attempts to examine the issue of ethnic violence and, hence, the traumatic consequence it created on the psyche of the people in Indira Goswami's short story “The Journey”.

Keywords: Ethnic Violence; Trauma; Gender; Northeast Literature

The northeastern states have long struggled with the issue of insurgency for decades. For many years, the many states in this area – particularly Nagaland, Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura, and Sikkim – have been plagued by insurgencies, conflicts, killings, and other acts of violence. Authors from Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, such as Temsula Ao, Easterine Kire, and Mamang Dai, respectively, have outlined some of the most pressing socio-political challenges in their respective communities. Aruni Kashyap, Jahnavi Baruah, and Siddhartha Sarma are among the young writers who have tackled some of the region's most important concerns. These writers have tried to expose the little-known details of the brutal conflict that broke out between the Indian army and rebel groups from many northeastern states, as well as the horrible repercussions suffered by ordinary people.

The issue of terrorism and counterterrorism has gripped the whole region, and writers from this area have reflected it in their diverse creative works. Watitula Longkumer correctly notes in his article “Mapping the Literary Contours of North-East India” that “the purpose is not only to identify literary works of the region but also to engage in the varied parameters of these works that includes cultural dynamics, oral dynamics, topics of regional violence and the narratives of communistic expression” (20). Northeast writers delicately depict the raw reality of the region's sufferings, capture the viewpoints of the common people, and express hope for a better, peaceful future in their works, where violence and conflicts have become everyday occurrences. They depict the pain and marginalisation of historical and political tragedy, but not at the expense of identity and cultural loss. Commenting on the literature of the region, Margaret Ch. Zama states:

This is not to be simply taken as blind nostalgia for a way of life long lost, but must be received as voices of individual authors from societies caught in the cross current of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and cultural ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated. (xii)

In a similar manner, Indira Goswami attempts to highlight the traumatic experiences – fear, anxiety, despair, horror and hopelessness related to insurgency in her short story “The Journey”.

Indira Goswami is one of the most prominent modern Assamese authors who writes under the pen name Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Her writings not only deal with the life and issues of Assam. Her readers get to have a taste of life outside of Assam through her various books and short tales that are set in various parts of India. Her short story “The Journey” begins with the female narrator and her colleague Professor Mirajkar returning from their trip to Kaziranga National Park. They both worked at Delhi University and are in Assam for a conference that the local students are organising. The female narrator is engrossed in absorbing the natural

beauty of Assam, as vividly described by Goswami through the paddy field and varieties of trees they pass by. However, Professor Mirajkar is anxious and is always on alert for possible attacks and gunfire from the militants, which he calls terrorists. As they speed along the national highway, passing by the paddy fields, “Every now and then Mirajkar would jump into alertness, as if he had imagined gunfire. Then he’d lapse into a reverie again, looking gloomily out of the window...” (Goswami 130). What Mirajkar exhibits are common symptoms of psychological trauma, such as “intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation” (as qtd. in Herman 33). The constant fear of the uncertainty of events and the militancy permeates his every action. He also suffers from hyper-arousal or hyper-vigilantism, which is another obvious sign of trauma. In the words of Judith Herman, “After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert, as if the danger might return at any moment. Physiological arousal continues unabated” (35). His fear arises from the killing of one of his best friends by the extremists in Punjab. He keeps asking the narrator if they have been able to control insurgency in the beautiful state of Assam. It uniquely parallels the rigorous scrutiny in every checkpoint they pass.

Mirajkar fits the description of a traumatised subject where the readers get a first glimpse of it through his anxiety about being in Assam. According to Oxford Medicine: “Anxiety refers to multiple mental and physiological phenomena, including a person’s conscious state of worry over a future unwanted event, or fear of an actual situation. Anxiety and fear are closely related”. The two most prominent signs of psychological trauma are anxiety and fear. The word trauma refers to bodily harm or wound, but in recent years, diverse viewpoints have defined its meaning differently. A number of scholars have contributed to the development of trauma theory, including Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Anne Whitehead, Spiegelman, and Versluys. Trauma, according to Luckhurst, is a “cusp term” and “conceptual knot whose successful permeation must be understood by the impressive range of elements it ties together and which allows it to travel to such diverse places in the network of knowledge” (The Trauma Question 14). According to the Oxford Dictionary, trauma is “a mental condition caused by severe shock, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time” or that may be related to “an unpleasant experience that makes you feel upset and/or anxious.”

Trauma narratives emerging from the North-East are unlike the Western conventional mainstream narratives of trauma like that of the Holocaust, World Wars or Vietnam War. Narratives from these region focus more on the collective nature of violence and hence the collective trauma and memory. The debilitating factors of violence and trauma as a result of the never ending conflicts and instability continue to have a debilitating effect on the lives of the people. The term trauma is derived from a Greek word meaning “wound” or “blow,” which is increasingly being used to describe mental health issues (Caruth 3). According to Freud, trauma is defined as an injury that is caused to the victim’s mind rather than their body. Explaining the Freudian understanding of trauma, Cathy Caruth argues:

The wound of the mind-the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, ...” but rather an event that, like Tancred’s first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

Mirajkar suffers from intense psychological turmoil. The character of Mirajkar is a reflection of every mainland Indian who associates the northeastern region of India with a disturbed area. After their visit to Kaziranga National Park, they were anxious to return to Guwahati before dark. Mirajkar’s trauma is revealed in his claim that he “was not afraid of wild animals... but he was definitely afraid of terrorists” (Goswami 129). It is evident that the violence results in a political, social and cultural trauma which not only affects the victim but shatters the entire fabric of the society.

Moreover, Mirajkar is a witness in remembering his friend who was killed by the militants, which has left a mark on his psyche. He persists in questioning the narrator on their ability to curb terrorism within the otherwise beautiful state. Felman is of the idea that literature is testimony in itself in her essay “Camus’ The Plague, or a Monument to Witnessing”. She writes:

The specific task of the literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which the reader now historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others – in one’s own body, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one’s own immediate physical involvement. (108)

In light of the above statement, the story “Journey” transforms itself from a story into a testimony of the traumatic past. The driver also voices out his testimony when he claims: “Last year, this road was smeared with blood. There was always a crossfire of machine guns, exploding grenades. Now it’s all quiet. No one is seen with a gun. Yes, no guns.” As if a soft carpet had covered it all – the blood stains, the dumps of arms and ammunitions, the smell of gunpowder (Goswami 130). It exposes the physical and psychological wounds embedded in a constant and pervasive conflict embedded in the people’s consciousness. Dori Laub (1992) writes about witnessing the trauma: “The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed” (57). The readers here become the blank slate who get a view of the traumatic experiences of the people of Assam through the characters and incidents in the story.

The narrative of the story depicts different types of violence. The unexpected emergence of Kanbap near the end serves as an example of the first aspect of terroristic violence with its extreme unpredictability. Next is the depiction of Kanbap’s sister Nirmali, a young woman – whose legs are broken by some men of her community because she dared to fall in love with an Indian soldier whom they regard as enemy. It sublimated the critique of gendered violence. Nirmali gets brutally kicked by her brother later on and gets verbally insulted by her parents when she appears towards the end of the story. The older man and woman become the representatives of poverty-stricken common people; frequent natural disasters like floods worsen their situation. Before they leave, the couple is given some money by the narrator and Mirajkar. Nirmali comes limping and cautiously makes her way into the shop. As she hobbles inside, her parents scold her. But she becomes the centre of focus only for a moment, and her condition changes into something ordinary, forgettable, and repetitious in a society where poverty is dominant.

The character of Nirmali is an example of the vulnerability of being a woman bound by social and cultural ideologies. Michelle Balaev, in *Trends in Literary Trauma Theory*, states: “The trick of trauma in fiction is that the individual protagonist functions to express a unique personal traumatic experience, yet the protagonist also functions to represent and convey an event that was experienced by a group of people, either historically based or prospectively imagined” (155). Though not the protagonist, Nirmali is a character who has minimal presence in the story, yet her silence makes great significance in exposing the victimization of women in a conflict-torn state. Her parents can also be held accountable for not only rendering her mute and invisible, but it appears as if they have accepted the abuse and violence subjected to her body as a normal part of life.

The main concern for the old husband and wife, based on their previous conversation, is what would happen to their militant son. Instead of giving any attention to the condition of their daughter they are more troubled about their son. Kanbap suddenly appears in a manner akin to an explosion. He is described as a young boy across whose cheek ran a slit, “a deep gash, from eye to lip – made by a bullet or a sharp knife. There was blood and pus in it. The flesh under his lips looked as if it had been ripped open and we could see his teeth in the quivering light” (138). His appearance is ghastly. The images of injury used by the writer for the character of Kanbap make the readers feel the impact of the lingering disturbances and conflict. Instead of answering the questions of his parents, he directs all his rage and anger towards Nirmali, who is “sitting in the corner and trembling with fear” (138). He insensitively grabs her hair and threatens her: “I will smash your womb! I will kill the bastard child of that soldier you are carrying Making love with an Indian soldier dirty bitch! Phoooh!

Phooh!” (138-139). It reveals the inherent patriarchal obsession over the chastity of women where Kanbap feels that Nirmali has not only defiled herself by having sexual relations before marriage but has dishonoured the entire community by sleeping with an Indian soldier who came to Assam to wipe out the militants. Therefore, he feels it to be justified to assault her as a punishment for her deeds physically. It also shows that various parameters of purity, chastity, honour and community exist that define and produce the identity of a woman. Despite his parents urging him to stay, he rushes with the money from the narrator and Mirajkar with the intention of buying carbine explosives from rhino poachers. The narrative exposes the ugliness and the vulgar side of the violence through the depiction of Kanbap, where the author tries to locate the fear and trauma of the people.

Nirmali's suffering and misfortune are indicative of the gendered nature of violence. It is clear that violence is systematically used as a political tool against vulnerable women like Nirmali in order to force her into silence and domination. The story observes that women are to be not only chaste but also obedient, where “the typical image of a “good woman” is still one who upholds the honour of the family, maintains the “culture of silence” prevailing in the private domain and is obedient and sacrificing” (Mathur 55). She is also devoid of any ability to protest or oppose since she must accept her fate. She must endure being shunned as a result of her relationship with an outsider, a soldier who is typically seen as the enemies of the insurgents. She is blamed for betraying the trust of her society. The hatred is turned towards her not only by the community by battering her legs but even by her own brother, who thinks it right to abuse her physically, and the emotional indifference of her parents. Nirmali is not only muted, but she is made unable to express her traumatization. Her parent's lack of sympathy for her results in the ultimate violation of the familial bond, which leads to her condemned isolation: “The most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is isolation. This is not the same as ‘being alone’ in the more straightforward sense. It is feeling locked out of the possibility of human connection” (Miller 5). When the society and her own brother does the part of physically abusing her, her parents sadly fulfil the part of emotionally abusing her.

Moreover, her family does not accept her as a victim thus refusing to be a witness to her circumstances. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in their book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), attempt to link trauma with testimony. They emphasize the need for trauma to be articulated, conveyed and to be heard. The unique position of being a witness is described by Felman as that “the appointment to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak for others and to others” (3). While her parents completely disregard her, the narrator, as well as Mirajkar, is assigned by the writer to bear witness to the conditions of the people. In ‘Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening’, Dori Laub conceptualises the witness as “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (57). They become secondary witnesses and become a “participant and a co-owner” (57) of the trauma of others.

The stories coming from the various regions of North-East India are significantly marked by violence, which contributes to the identification of the writings as literatures of trauma. Moreover, the works achieve an authentic character when the writers themselves belong to the region. The hidden and implicit relatedness between violence as in the lived experience of the people and violence as a concept can be understood through the textualization and narrativization of trauma. Violence and its consequent trauma is a complicated issue that needs to be understood through various contexts, such as political, cultural and social. Violence can manifest itself in various forms, out of which gendered violence tends to expose the inherent misogynistic ideologies of society. The experiences that women have and the many forms of oppression that they encounter – which either traumatise or re-traumatise them – are indicative of their marginalisation, which makes the situation worse in politically unstable states like those of the Northeast.



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